

Hopping on the Bandstand

By Dennis Knight

When it arrived on our new television back in 1956, it was called *Philadelphia Bandstand*. The twenty-six year old Dick Clark was the host, and it featured a big studio packed with cute bobby-soxers and teen boys in chinos with a useless buckle on their rear. When I say the show arrived on our television, I should clarify that it arrived only on those weekdays when Dad was out on his job as a railroad engineer, for if he had been home at the time, it would have arrived only over his dead body.

The show went national as *American Bandstand* on August 5, 1957 playing five days a week in the late afternoon on the ABC television network. Dick Clark kept *Bandstand* on the air from Philadelphia in that same format and schedule until 1963 when it became a taped weekly show airing nationally from Los Angeles.

There was a *Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On*, the Diamonds were singing the praises of *Little Darlin'*, the Everly Brothers were doing their best to *Wake Up Little Suzie*. Elvis was *All Shook Up* by *The Jailhouse Rock*. Ricky Nelson was sneaking snuck away from Ozzie and Harriet for *A Teenager's Romance* with *Be-bop Baby*, and Fats Domino was *Walkin'* on *Blueberry Hill*.

There were many wild new dances coming out of the inner cities in those years, but Clark and his watchdogs at ABC kept it pretty conservative to begin with, mostly bop or line dances like *The Stroll*. Soon they were doing *The Shake*, *The Walk*, *The Alligator*, *The Dog*, and by 1959 *The Twist*. The kids even created some of their own dances, including that crazy *Hand Jive*.

It wasn't often that the teens would sit, but when they did, it was in gym style bleachers. Dick Clark would slow things down with interviews and he would poll regulars or visiting performers, rating new records on a scale, and critiquing them with comments like, "It's got a good beat, and you can dance to it." Many stars would appear on the show to plug and lip synch their latest singles. Freddy "Boom Boom" Cannon holds the record for that with 110 appearances.

I found *Bandstand* interesting because it was full of life with all the new rock and roll songs and pretty girls in pony tails, and I would happily and quietly sit right it through to the final credits. It was, of course, a purely intellectual fascination with music and culture.

My sister Maureen, four years my elder, was in 1956 a sassy teen in a poodle skirt, and unlike me, she could not take *American Bandstand* sitting down. When the theme broke onto the air, she would shove our big round coffee table into a corner, and instantly our living room became a high school gym ready for a sock hop. My studious observation of the cultural aspects of the presentation was severely tested, my feet were at risk of being stomped, and six decades later, I still have nightmares of flying poodles.